



A Strain Doesn't Mean No Gain

Minor injury, major dilemma: A slight sprain or strain can have a big impact on an exerciser. Serious exercisers might try to work through the pain to maintain their level of fitness, but they run the risk of more serious damage; less-motivated types can turn into couch potatoes who think exercise is impossible.

The truth is, if you've suffered a slight injury, have seen a doctor about it, and are on the road to recovery, there are plenty of options available that will keep you in good shape. This is especially true since "de-training"—the body's loss of strength or cardiovascular conditioning—doesn't happen as quickly as many people assume.

Here are some general guidelines for working out while injured. We've identified some common minor injuries, but it's important for you to get a doctor's confirmation of your injury and a doctor's permission to perform the exercises detailed below.

Sprained ankle. If the ankle is slightly sprained and you've given it a week's rest, you can consider a wide range of cardiovascular exercises. High-impact or high-strain workouts, such as running or stair-climbing, are out of the question, but light biking is a possibility. An exercise bike is preferable to biking outdoors, as you can control your speed and environment more easily. Pay attention to any pain your ankle is giving you as you pedal, and lower your pace until there is no pain. If the ankle won't allow two-legged pedaling, use the toe clip on your good side and try some one-legged pedaling. Go easy with this, however, because it will put higher-than-usual strain on your good leg.

Swimming is a good alternative, too. Do it slowly, using only your upper body. This provides a very intense aerobic workout, since the upper body usually handles only about 30% of the work in freestyle swimming. Be prepared for a shorter workout, and don't overdo it.

If you prefer dry land, there are numerous pieces of cardio equipment—more and more are being introduced all the time—that offer both upper- and lower-body workouts: simply work the upper-body component of the machine. Start slowly and maintain a light pace, or you'll burn out very quickly or injure something above the waist. "Be careful, since it's easy to overload it and get an 'impingement' injury in the shoulders, especially if you're muscular," says Gerald Greenspan, M.S., founder of Columbus (Ohio) Fitness Consultants.

Shin splints. A case of shin splints can take weeks to heal, so use extra caution here. Your options are similar to those outlined for a sprained ankle, but don't use toe clips on your bike. These transfer stress to the front of the lower legs. Injuries can give you a chance to work body parts opposite those injured—in fact, sometimes weakness in these parts has caused the injury. While rehabilitating shin splints, work on stretching the muscles of the back of your legs.

With most minor lower-extremity injuries you can continue a fairly comprehensive weight routine. However, avoid any exercise that requires lower-body balance or exertion, such as squats.

Injuries to knee or shoulder joints. It's never wise to try to diagnose these yourself, and it's impossible to offer general exercise guidelines, as there are so many different possible injuries to these joints. See a doctor or physical therapist, and make it clear you'd like to keep exercising if possible. Be prepared for a prescription of new exercises from the expert.

Back injuries. Once more, we're talking prevention, not repair. Acute injuries might require total rest, but chronic pain frequently is treated with a combination of stretching and isometric exercises. Here again, it's necessary to see a specialist and follow instructions closely, even if that means avoiding exercise entirely for a while. "Dedicated exercisers think they can work through injuries, but that can cause permanent problems," says Greenspan. "I know it sounds wimpy, but your body needs healing time."—Noah Liberman